

University of Groningen

Citizens' Autonomy and Corporate Cultural Power

Herzog, Lisa Maria

Published in:
Journal of Social Philosophy

DOI:
[10.1111/josp.12310](https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12310)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2020

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Herzog, L. M. (2020). Citizens' Autonomy and Corporate Cultural Power. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 51(2), 205-230. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12310>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Citizens' Autonomy and Corporate Cultural Power

Lisa Herzog

1. Introduction

The citizens of a democracy cannot be indifferent to the conditions of the possibility of living a life that one can call one's own—an autonomous life. If one accepts this premise, one has good reason to scrutinize the ways in which the minds of individuals are shaped by their work environment. In this paper, I introduce the notion of “corporate cultural power” and evaluate it from a perspective of autonomy. Many contemporary societies are characterized by a combination of democracy and corporate capitalism.¹ Most of their citizens depend on a labor income, a fact that raises numerous normative questions. One of them, which has received little attention so far, is how to safeguard citizens' autonomy in the face of corporate cultural power.

Many industries put strong pressures on employees to “fit in.” As a former hedge fund manager put it in an interview: “Basically, the hedge fund world is very much like: this is how we are, and it's almost old school, because this is how it has been for years. So, a new person coming in, trying to be different, is not going to work. If you don't join the cult, you basically are left behind.”² What it means to “join the cult” varies from industry to industry and company to company; it can include, for example, a certain habitus and style of clothing, a notion of success, an understanding of how to treat individuals of different gender and different ethnicities, or an expectation to pursue certain hobbies or cultural interests. Spending eight or more hours working in a social environment in which such values, norms, and expectations are upheld, it is likely that individuals will, to some degree, be shaped by them. This is not the same as the *déformation professionnelle* of the doctor who sees every individual as a patient, but rather a *déformation corporatiste*, stemming from the social environment within which one works.³

Many corporations actively use and promote notions of “corporate culture,” “corporate identity,” or “corporate DNA” in order to shape the preferences and beliefs of their employees. To be sure, this may not always be successful, and where it is successful, it may be helped by processes of self-selection on the part of employees. Other corporations may not actively endorse a certain culture, and yet there may be strong pressures to adapt at least one's outward behavior to

the expectations of colleagues and managers. Friends and family may feel some unease when they see a person change in response to such pressures. But is there more to this phenomenon, from a normative perspective, than such unease? The answer I provide in this paper is that this is indeed the case, especially because many institutional safeguards that have, in the past, limited the influence of corporate cultural power, are at risk of being eroded.

While much has been written about the power of corporations⁴ and about organizational culture, the connection between the two has rarely been explored.⁵ Two strands of literature touch upon similar topics from a normative perspective. In a recent paper, Sandrine Blanc discusses the question of how individuals' "moral space," that is, "the set of situations and actions either open to or which indeed require moral judgment,"⁶ can be preserved in corporations. But we also need to ask whether and how corporations exert an influence on individuals, shaping their preferences and beliefs, a step that comes *before* questions about their "moral space" even arise. A second debate, which builds on empirical insights by Arlie Hochschild⁷ and others, concerns the ethical dimensions of companies attempting to influence the emotions of employees. As Ingrid Fulmer and Bruce Barry discuss, this topic can come up in "charismatic" leadership styles, which "implicitly or explicitly appeal to the emotions of organizational followers" rather than their capacity for reflection,⁸ or in issues concerning emotional labor, for example, in nursing, for which ethical constraints might be needed. Corporate cultural power is both more widespread and more elusive than these specific phenomena.

Neither has the role of corporate cultural power been discussed in political philosophy, despite a growing interest in corporations.⁹ The Rawlsian approach, with its emphasis on the "basic structure," had long overshadowed interest in "meso-level" institutions and had focused attention on formal structures, rather than on seemingly "soft" factors such as social norms and cultural influences. In recent years, however, this has started to change: there is now more interest in normative questions "below the state," in Chiara Cordelli's words.¹⁰ In addition to corporations, institutions such as civil society organizations or religious organizations are now considered from normative perspectives, whether of justice or of democracy.¹¹ This paper contributes to this literature: by considering the threat that corporate cultural power can pose to citizens' autonomy, it draws out implications not only for corporate governance, but also for the broader institutional framework within which corporations are embedded, that is, implications that fall into the realms of *both* business ethics and political philosophy.¹² As I hope to make clear, taking corporate cultural power into account sheds new light onto a number of debates in political philosophy.

I will explore the normative dimensions of corporate power on the basis of what may appear to be a weak normative premise: all citizens should live under conditions in which they have a reasonable chance to lead an autonomous life. This may not be the only normative dimension of corporate cultural power, but it is a central one. My discussion is "non-ideal" in the sense that I do not question the legitimacy of large-scale workplaces as such, and remain agnostic with regard

to the question of whether or not such organizations would be part of an ideally just society. But my account is nonetheless reformist: I argue that corporate cultural power should be curtailed in order to preserve the conditions for individual autonomy.

In the next section, I briefly explain the notion of autonomy on which my argument is based, followed by a short discussion of the relation between social and cultural influences and autonomy on a general level, and a defense against the charge of perfectionism. I then explore the phenomenon of corporate cultural power in more detail, drawing on empirical literature and responding to some objections. I argue that corporations have a moral responsibility to use their cultural power in ways that do not undermine individuals' autonomy. There are good reasons for putting in place safeguards against too large an influence of corporate cultural power, which I discuss by drawing some connections to recent proposals in political philosophy. I conclude by pointing out how the argument I have developed could be taken further, to cover not only the cultural power of corporations over employees, on which I here focus, but also the impact of corporations on the broader culture.

2. Autonomy and Its Social and Cultural Conditions

In this section, I argue for two claims: first, to understand the preconditions of autonomy, we need to take the cultural context into account; second, a commitment to autonomy, including attention to its cultural preconditions, is not perfectionist in a problematic sense, and traditional arguments against government involvement in the area of "culture" can be answered.

Autonomy, or "governing oneself," can be understood, in a modest sense, as a precondition for a life that can be called one's own. Many authors distinguish between the "competence condition" and the "authenticity condition" of autonomy.¹³ The first describes the *ability* to govern one's own life, for example, to follow through with one's plans. The second describes the fact that one's preferences are *one's own ones*, rather than ones that one has uncritically taken over from others.

Neither condition requires thinking about individuals as detached from social contexts. This conception of autonomy is compatible with holding that the human self is "largely a product of social factors."¹⁴ In fact, it is unlikely that individuals can develop and maintain sufficient levels of autonomy *without* support from their environment. As Jennifer Nedelsky, for example, emphasizes, autonomy should not be understood as independence, but rather as a relational concept: it is made possible by suitable social relations that provide the "capacity for creative interaction," allowing individuals to "find their own law."¹⁵ Thus, instead of thinking about autonomy as a feature of atomistic individuals, Nedelsky and others have pointed out that we need a concept of autonomy that takes the necessity of autonomy-enhancing social relations seriously.

Obviously, the formative periods of childhood and youth, and the social relations with parents, teachers, and other caretakers, play a crucial role for developing autonomy. But the conditions for autonomy need to be in place for individuals during their whole lives, otherwise their ability to lead a life in which they govern themselves may be at risk later on. One can distinguish, here, between two categories of social relations: those that actively support individuals' autonomy, and those that might not support it, but at least do not undermine it. In what follows, I assume that the former have their primary space in the private realm: in intimate relations within families, partnerships, and friendships; of course the broader societal structures and culture also need to be such that autonomy-enhancing social relations of this kind are possible. For the world of work, in contrast, on which I here focus, a minimum condition is that social relations should be such that autonomy is *not threatened*.¹⁶

Two conditions for developing and maintaining autonomy are particularly relevant for the purpose of thinking about threats to autonomy in the workplace; they are minimum conditions on which theorists of autonomy on a broad spectrum, from John Stuart Mill to Nedelsky, could probably agree. The first is the ability to hear a plurality of voices and positions, rather than being exposed to one single system of values. It is often through comparison and confrontation with alternatives that one comes to see the strengths and weaknesses of values and arguments, and it is through critical reflection on counterarguments or different paradigms that one comes to endorse, refine or reject them.¹⁷ This is one of the reasons why it is wrong for states to force citizens to adopt one and only one worldview: not only does this directly violate their freedoms, it also undermines the conditions of the possibility of autonomy, because they do not have a chance to think critically about alternatives and to develop beliefs and preferences that are truly their own.

The second condition is the ability to step back from one's daily activities and to think about who one is and what values one endorses. Hannah Arendt has called this kind of reflection "Socratic" thinking: an inner dialogue with "this silent partner I carry with myself."¹⁸ It requires interrupting the "restless activity" of one's days, during which it is almost impossible to think critically about what one is doing.¹⁹ Such inner dialogue helps individuals to find out who they are: what their beliefs, preferences, and commitments are. To be sure, it is not only in inner dialogue that they do so: dialogue with others can also play a crucial role. It needs to be a dialogue, though, that is sufficiently free from social pressures and strategic considerations, otherwise it is unlikely that individuals can "open up" to the point of challenging their fundamental commitments. Such dialogue can certainly take in many social contexts, including the workplace, but it has its prime place in people's private lives (and maybe in political life), not in the hectic world of work with its numerous pressures and dependencies.

Theorists who care about the autonomy of citizens thus have reasons to care about the institutional framework of society, and to ask whether it is supportive of autonomy. For example, this framework needs to ensure that all members of society have sufficient free time for reflection and for maintaining the kinds of social

relations that nurture their autonomy. Insofar as these theorists are liberals, they would certainly want the institutional framework to provide space for a plurality of nonstate agents, for example, cultural institutions, to play a role in creating the conditions for developing and maintaining autonomy. Insofar as they are egalitarians, they care about the conditions of the possibility of an autonomous life being in place not only for the privileged, but for everyone.

However, one should consider not only *formal* institutions, in the sense of coercive governmental institutions, when thinking about citizens' autonomy, but also the broader culture of a society. A society's culture, in this context, can be understood as a complex, interrelated combination of cultural influences from various sources.²⁰ Given what we know about human psychology from history, ethnography, and experimental studies, we must assume that culture has a large impact on human beings. Man is a social animal, and adaptation to the culture one finds oneself in can be an almost instinctual reaction.²¹ The desire for social recognition is a powerful motivator, and the sense that "this is what everyone does" often guides individuals' decisions and actions.

A society's culture can emphasize "thinking for oneself" and value the plurality and diversity that comes from people choosing from a broad variety of worldviews and ways of life—or it can frown upon individual choice and emphasize the importance of established role models and traditions, thus working against the desire for autonomy. For citizens' autonomy to be supported, the former is obviously more helpful than the latter. Again, from a liberal egalitarian perspective, both freedom and equality matter in this respect. The state should protect the freedom of all individuals to participate in processes of creating and changing the society's culture. The egalitarian component is that these cultural conditions should be provided for *everyone*, not just for those in privileged positions or who are part of a powerful mainstream culture. This is why a state might also take some steps to protect and support cultural projects by minorities that would otherwise be crowded out by the mainstream culture.

The second claim I want to defend is that this understanding of autonomy and its cultural preconditions is not perfectionist, and does not lead to a problematic picture of the state's role. A critic might object to the proposed understanding of autonomy, and to the argument that its cultural preconditions deserve to be taken seriously, by claiming that this is a perfectionist ideal that is not shared by everyone, and that the state must not promote it, but should rather stay neutral. But this criticism is misplaced, because the point of my argument is not to push or entice individuals to achieve the highest possible degree of autonomy. Rather, the point is to put them into a position in which they can make a meaningful choice about whichever way of life they want to pursue.²² As such, it does not violate the imperative of neutrality.

Nonetheless, the idea that a liberal state should somehow care about culture—rather than focus exclusively on the *formal* institutional framework—can raise legitimate worries. My point, however, is not that the state should try to directly "install" or "create" a certain kind of culture. Rather, it should create a

framework in which an autonomy-friendly culture can flourish. Where it might be justified in taking a more active stance, in contrast, are cultural tendencies that might *harm* individuals' autonomy. Such cases are often related to imbalances of power, for example, when a cultural majority puts pressure on cultural minorities. In such situations, it is unlikely that improvements of the cultural climate will come about just by themselves, in some kind of organic process, because the power differentials reinforce, and are in turn reinforced by, the cultural influence of the more powerful party. Thus, the impetus to address such situations—not necessarily by direct interventions, but maybe by changes in the broader framework—stems from egalitarian as much as from autonomy-related concerns.

To be sure, when doing so, one needs to take into account whether the proposed cure might be worse than the disease, that is, whether other limitations of autonomy would be required. Arguably, however, there is a spectrum of possibilities of what governments can do that would not reduce autonomy in different places, for example by providing information or reining in the influence of powerful actors.²³

In order to clarify the picture I have in mind, it is helpful to draw a parallel to a similar question, famously posed by Ronald Dworkin, namely “Can a Liberal State Support Art?”²⁴ His answer is a cautious “yes,” arguing that the “structural aspects” of a society’s culture are “themselves worthy of attention,” and that a case can be made for “defin[ing] a rich cultural structure, one that multiplies distinct possibilities or opportunities of value, and count[ing] ourselves trustees for protecting the richness of our culture for those who will live their lives in it after us.”²⁵ This does not imply that the state should itself *create* cultural goods, but rather that it should create *opportunities* for citizens to do so. In analogy, I propose that a state can and should take care of the framework of society with an eye to the cultures that can flourish in it or that are suppressed—not because any of these cultures should be considered as, by itself, more valuable than others, but because some cultural tendencies might pose risks for the autonomy of individuals and make it very difficult for them to develop and maintain their autonomy.²⁶

In fact, many theoretical approaches seem to simply presuppose that the conditions for developing and maintaining autonomy are fulfilled. For example, many democratic theories assume that individuals can develop political preferences that they express through their votes. If their political preferences were shaped by others, for example, family clans or the corporations they work for, the idea of democratic government as “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” in Abraham Lincoln’s famous words, crumbles: it is then these entities, rather than “the people,” who govern. Or take theories of distributive justice: it is standardly assumed that individuals can use their resources according to their own preferences, rather than using them for supporting families or religious groups whose orders they follow blindly.

Thus, autonomy, understood in this minimal sense, is a normative ideal that is widely shared by thinkers across the political and ideological spectrum. To be sure, commentators may disagree about the precise boundaries of autonomy, and they may also disagree on what is required in order to create the conditions of the

possibility of autonomy (a judgment that is likely to be influenced by empirical assumptions as much as normative commitments). But they can nonetheless agree that certain phenomena present threats to autonomy, and that such threats should be mitigated, usually by changing the formal framework of institutions such that cultural threats to autonomy are prevented and autonomy-friendly cultures can flourish. These are the assumptions on which the following reflections about corporate cultural power are based.

3. Corporate Culture, Corporate Power

In this section, I describe the phenomenon of corporate cultural power in more detail, in order to see in what ways it might be a threat to individuals' autonomy. As a first approximation, we can describe corporate cultural power as the power corporations have because they set the defaults of what individuals do, thereby creating a certain corporate culture. It can be based on formal or informal norms. Employees often reinforce the corporate culture by unconsciously following these norms, thereby making deviations more difficult for others. The phenomenon of corporate or organizational culture is widely acknowledged in the empirical literature. Terrence E. Deal and Allen A. Kennedy, in their influential book *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*, draw on Marvin Bower for a very simple definition: they understand culture as "the way we do things around here."²⁷ A more sophisticated account, by Edgar Schein, defines it as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems."²⁸ Schein distinguishes three layers of culture: artifacts, espoused values, and beliefs and underlying basic assumptions. Philosophers interested in corporate culture understand it in similar ways: Edwin Hartman describes it as "the body of shared beliefs, values, expectations, and norms of behavior that shape life in the organization and account for certain observable artifacts,"²⁹ and Seumas Miller describes it as comprising "the informal attitudes, values, norms, and ethos or "spirit" that pervades an institution."³⁰

What is less discussed, however, is how corporate culture can be understood as a form of power over employees. This may have to do with the fact that the notion of power is itself contested; we can, however, draw on some conceptualizations that emphasize nonmaterial aspects related to cultural phenomena. Thus, in an influential account, Stephen Lukes has distinguished three "faces" of power: decision-making power, the power *not* to make decisions, and ideological power.³¹ Whereas the first is publicly visible, the two others operate less openly and are hence more difficult to analyze. The power *not* to make decisions is the power to take certain items off the agenda. Ideological power concerns power over beliefs and preferences. For my notion of cultural power, the second and the third dimension are obviously of great importance. David Hiley, who distinguishes "behavioral,"

“ideological,” and “disciplinary” dimensions of power in organizations, notes that ideological power works “through the way a belief system or set of values figures in structuring or fostering the conditions for certain explicit outcomes.”³²

A helpful concept is Karl Weick’s notion of “sensemaking,” which describes how individuals jointly describe, interpret, and make sense of the social reality around them.³³ This process is dynamic, social, and interactive, and it can have performative effects. However, not all individuals play an equal role in it; those who are in management positions, for example, are likely to have a greater impact.³⁴ Tim Hallett, who conceptualizes organizational culture as a “negotiated order,” draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of “habitus” and “symbolic power” to describe how some individuals have “the power to define the situation.”³⁵ These various accounts of organizational culture all agree that it includes defaults and the interpretation of situations and events, and that it often goes unnoticed. As Hallett notes, for example: “Oftentimes ... people do not realize they are imbuing a negotiator with legitimacy and symbolic power.”³⁶ Nonetheless, this form of power can be very effective, because it includes the giving and taking of legitimacy and the definition of what individuals will see as normal.

Based on these theoretical accounts, we can provide the following definition of corporate cultural power:

The power exercised by a corporation by defining the routines, descriptions and interpretations of how and why things are done, thereby making sense of the social reality and creating defaults with regard to beliefs and values that individuals may not be fully aware of and that are hard to challenge.³⁷

This notion is, admittedly, fuzzy around the edges, but this seems unavoidable given that the social reality to which it refers is equally fuzzy and complex. There is also an inevitably subjective element in how individuals perceive it. Nonetheless, it seems hard to deny the existence and the impact of this form of power. The questions implicitly answered by the cultural power of organizations can concern tasks within the organization—for example, how much time should one spend working? What counts as a successful project? What counts as being a good colleague? What behavior between individuals of different gender is seen as appropriate within the corporation?—but also broader questions—for example, what counts as a successful life, and what role does work have in it? What counts as being a good friend? What gender roles are “normal”?

Corporate cultural power can be exercised intentionally or unintentionally. Hallett, for example, draws on Erving Goffman’s distinction between “signals given” in a conscious, intentional way, and “signals given off” in an unconscious, unintended way.³⁸ Even—or especially!—when “given off,” the signals sent by a senior manager can have a strong impact on the corporate culture. For example, by “giving away” that she does not take certain pieces of government regulation seriously, a manager may reinforce a culture in which employees work around, rather than within, the regulatory framework. Corporations and their management cannot avoid sending signals, nor can they avoid setting defaults. New members

are socialized into the community of those who accept these defaults, contributing to their social reinforcement.³⁹ Thus, corporations can, arguably, not avoid exercising *some* degree of cultural power.

Often, however, corporate cultural power is used intentionally. Some management scholars emphatically recommend doing so. Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman's management classic *In Search of Excellence* strongly emphasizes the role of values.⁴⁰ They argue that "excellent companies" have "developed cultures that have incorporated the values and practices of the great leaders and thus those shared values can be seen to survive for decades after the passing of the original guru."⁴¹ This is remarkably strong language, and Peters and Waterman are aware of it: they briefly discuss the question of whether such cultures could also be put to sinister uses.⁴² But they nonetheless insist on the importance of culture and the legitimacy of using it. Terry Deal and Allen Kennedy have brought the topic into the mainstream of management scholarship, both descriptively and prescriptively.⁴³

Why are managers and management scholars so interested in cultural power? Cultural power can complement, and sometimes replace, other forms of control. As Peters and Waterman note, "the stronger the culture and the more it was directed toward the marketplace, the less need was there for policy manuals, organization charts, or detailed procedures and rules."⁴⁴ If employees share a corporation's values, they need to be offered fewer material incentives. In this book, and also in many other pieces in management scholarship, the importance of culture is taken as given. As Deal and Kennedy write about early American business leaders: "They believed that the lives and productivity of their employees were shaped by where they worked."⁴⁵ Shared values can act "as an informal control system that tells people what is expected of them,"⁴⁶ because "the power of values is that people care about them."⁴⁷ "Rites and Rituals" matter, because, as Napoleon said, "You lead men by baubles, not words."⁴⁸

As William Ouchi argues, from a transaction cost perspective it can be highly advantageous for corporations to rely not only on "hierarchies," but to form "clans" of employees who share certain values.⁴⁹ This is particularly relevant when tasks are complex, highly interactive, or otherwise hard to measure, so that the value added by each individual is hard to evaluate. This is often the case in "technologically advanced or closely integrated industries, where teamwork is common, technologies change often, and therefore individual performance is highly ambiguous."⁵⁰ With more and more of purely "bureaucratic" tasks being delegated to computer programs and robots, we can expect that more and more industries in which human individuals work will take on the character of "clans."

In order to really appreciate the impact of corporate cultural power, it is important to remember that in capitalist societies there is usually an imbalance of power between employers and employees. Because most citizens are not independently rich, employers have leverage over them: employees agree to obey orders in return for receiving an income. Even if individuals have exit options, these usually consist in finding a job in a *different* corporation, rather than being self-employed. Hence, many individuals cannot escape the sphere of influence

of corporations.⁵¹ This is a crucial difference between the workplace and other spaces in which different forms of cultural power might be exercised over individuals, for example, religious organizations or sports clubs. Individuals can leave the latter without losing their income, which means that one can usually assume that their membership is voluntary. Hence, worries about autonomy only arise in rare cases, for example, when children are brought up within close-knit religious groups without any opportunity for getting to know outside perspectives.

Corporate cultural power, in contrast, works within this context of a general asymmetry of power between employers and employees, and it is intertwined with formal power and formal rules. In turn, it influences how formal power and formal rules are interpreted and applied. For example, the cultural context defines which rules are seen as “bureaucratic nonsense” and which ones are seen as “important safety regulations.” Cultural power can also be intertwined with disciplinary power in a Foucaultian sense, which works through architectural displays and bodily discipline.⁵² It can be connected to various other forms of pressure, for example, pressures to contribute financially to the political agenda of one’s employer.⁵³

The central focus of corporate cultural power is thus things that happen *within* companies. But it is likely that corporate cultural power is not limited to the inside of corporations. If it shapes individuals’ beliefs and preferences, it can spill over into their private lives as well, and hence have a broader impact on society. For example, if employees get used to thinking about projects in terms of costs and benefits, this may also influence how they approach their private lives. This influence, via the influence on employees, is different from the influence corporations might have on the broader culture through advertisement. Some corporations, however, try to create a coherent “corporate identity” or “corporate DNA” that they use both vis-à-vis employees and vis-à-vis customers and the broader public.

Before considering corporate cultural power from the perspective of autonomy, two general objections need to be answered. The first is that I have vastly exaggerated the effects of corporate cultural power. Corporate cultural power, it might be said, is a surface phenomenon, a gloss put on the actual relations of financial and coercive power. Individuals can look through the disguise, and insofar as they play along, pretending to endorse certain values, they do so for strategic reasons, not because they are really influenced by corporate cultural power.

One should grant to this critic that not every individual is equally susceptible to the influence of corporate cultural power. Some individuals are able to keep a clear mind and firm convictions even in the most unlikely circumstances. They might react to corporate cultural power with various forms of indifference and disengagement. But this is likely to require considerable mental and psychological energy. In an ethnographic study on “engineering culture,” Gideon Kunda describes how individuals deal with the company culture that their employer tries to impose on them. He distinguishes mechanisms of denial (suggesting that it is “only a job”), depersonalization (separation of one’s private self from one’s company self), and dramatization (conscious role playing precisely in order to show

one's distance from the role).⁵⁴ His research shows that individuals genuinely struggle with these issues, and often fail to remain unaffected. Kunda calls this the "culture trap": people are half coerced and half seduced to become uncritical of the company's aims.⁵⁵ Given this empirical evidence, the burden of proofs therefore lies with those who claim that corporate culture does *not* affect individuals.

A second objection consists in the claim that while corporate cultural power has an impact on individuals, it is impossible to predict, let alone manage, its effects—and, relatedly, that one cannot say that it is *management* that has such an impact on corporate culture. It would be a mistake, this critic holds, to think that one can move the levers of culture as if they were the levers of a Newtonian mechanical device. In addition to the "official" cultural power of the company, there is the informal cultural power that arises "bottom up" from employees, which includes the possibility of countercultures that openly mock the official slogans and resist attempts to change people's minds. The idea that one might be able to influence corporate cultural power in ways that allow for active management from above is therefore fundamentally misguided. But if one cannot control corporate cultural power, how could it be made an issue of normative concern? Wouldn't this rather be like attempting to make normative demands on the weather?⁵⁶

It is, admittedly, important to emphasize the elusive character of corporate cultural power. One should not see the phenomenon in a mechanistic way, and one should acknowledge that it is highly context-dependent. One can also agree that attempts to "micro-manage" corporate culture might backfire. But the fact that corporate cultural power, like all cultural phenomena, is variable and difficult to grasp does not mean that its effects are negligible. In cases in which managers actively draw on cultural values, they seem to be confident that they are able to do so, and one can hence hold them accountable for what they do.

There are in fact some reasons to think that managers have some possibilities of influencing corporate culture. For one thing, they are responsible for hiring processes, either directly or indirectly, by handing down the criteria for hiring. By selecting future members, managers have a say over the culture that will likely develop between them. Moreover, organizational scholars often emphasize the importance of setting "the tone from the top": senior management needs to be firm on certain issues, for example, nondiscrimination and the rejection of corruption, for them to have a chance to be embodied in the general culture of an organization. One reason for that is that while the actions and attitudes of many organizational members are visible only to their direct colleagues, the actions and attitudes of top managers are visible to all. With social media, this might in fact change, giving charismatic individuals from anywhere in the organization the possibility of becoming visible and hence having an impact on the corporate culture.

Thus, while one can acknowledge that corporate culture may be difficult to change just by fiat, this does not mean that there are no actions or behaviors—whether by managers or by others who can influence corporate culture⁵⁷—that can have an impact on it that is predictable with reasonable certainty. For example, if a senior manager—or an employee who has many followers on the

company's online network—makes sexist jokes, this is likely to have an impact on the corporate culture as a whole, not least because others will feel licensed to make sexist jokes as well. Therefore, if the case can be made that corporate cultural power poses a threat to autonomy, we have good reasons to ask what can be done about it, even if we have to be cautious about simplistic recipes.

4. The Specific Challenges of Corporate Cultural Power for Autonomy

In this section, I provide some reflections on why corporate cultural power poses a threat to citizens' autonomy that is sufficiently severe to justify the creation of institutional safeguards against it;⁵⁸ later, I will briefly discuss the possibility of an *autonomy-enhancing* corporate culture. The scenario of a threat is particularly relevant in situations in which individuals strongly depend on their jobs and have few exit options, which means that they have no realistic alternative to staying in their current job and "playing along." If one knows that one has exit options, even if one does not use them, this supports autonomous reflection, because it is worth asking "Do I want to play along or not?" If one has no exit options, or if the alternatives are likely to be the same stuff in a different (corporate) color, asking such questions and reflecting on them may appear to be a futile exercise. It is hence tempting to let oneself be engulfed by the corporate culture and the values and principles espoused in it.

It might be objected that such a situation is normatively problematic for a number of reasons—lack of freedom, dependence, the danger that power will be abused, and so on—and should therefore never be part of a just society anyway. This may well be true, but corporate cultural power is likely to have an effect on individuals' autonomy long before one arrives at the extreme lack of alternatives just described. Continued exposure to certain routines, descriptions and interpretations of the social world is likely to leave a mark on one's own beliefs and values, even if one could, in theory, exit an employment relation. Rather than idealizing the ability to resist such influences, it is worth taking the "culture trap" described in Kunda's ethnographic work seriously.

Two aspects of corporate cultural power are particularly relevant for considering its potentially negative impact on individuals' autonomy: routinization and implicitness. Routines can make one stop questioning one's behavior, leading to habitual compliance in which one does not pay attention to the details of what one does. We may hardly notice small shifts in the moral quality of what we do, even if, over time, these can add up to dramatic changes—this is the psychology of "slippery slopes." It is one reason for why organizations can get individuals to contribute to actions they would strongly condemn when considered in the abstract. As Maury Silver and Daniel Geller laconically put it: organizations can "routinize everything, including murder."⁵⁹ But one does not have to draw on such drastic cases; even if an action may not be morally problematic, individuals may not be autonomous in engaging in it, because they have been subject to corporate cultural power rather than having freely endorsed it. Corporate cultural power

works through habitualization and routinization, by making things appear normal. It silences the question of what each individual would actually see as justifiable when judging for himself or herself.

What contributes to this problem, and what is maybe the key distinction between cultural power and other forms of power exercised by corporations, is that it often functions implicitly: it is not made an issue, but rather works through what is taken for granted. Whereas explicit rules and regulations often contain a rationale for why things are to be done in a certain way, and the power exercised by managers through rewards and punishments is clearly visible, cultural power usually remains invisible. Often, individuals cannot directly challenge the premises that are taken for granted at their workplace. Without an opportunity for doing so, it can be difficult to see whether or not one can agree with the assumptions, norms, and values embedded in the corporate culture. It can take individuals quite some time to understand how the culture of their corporation functions, what values it transports, and what they themselves think about them—and by the time they have figured it out, they may already have been influenced, to some degree, by this very culture.

It is likely that processes of cognitive dissonance will occur: if individuals become suspicious that there might be a tension between their own values and the corporate culture, while at the same time feeling dependent on their job, they will probably come up with explanations that ease this tension. Psychologists have explored the various ways in which individuals can hold up a positive self-image even if they participate in atrocities, for example, by “advantageous comparisons” or “euphemistic labelling.”⁶⁰ In many cases, collective action problems are probably part of the story: if *all* individuals resisted the effects of corporate culture, for example by making certain premises of their work an explicit issue of discussion, it would not be very difficult for others to question them critically as well. But if most or all individuals let themselves be carried away by the culture, it is very hard for single individuals to withstand it.

It might be asked, however, how this kind of cultural influence is different from other cultural influences to which individuals are exposed.⁶¹ To be sure, individuals are not exposed to corporate cultural power—at least not directly, as employee—during the formative years of childhood and youth. But once they arrive at working age, their workplace is the social sphere, apart from their family, in which they are most immersed, in terms of the sheer amount of hours spent there. Moreover, as described above, they are usually more dependent on their employers than on any other organization, because they receive an income from them. This power differential is experienced in a very direct way: managers, with whom employees interact every day, can refuse them a promotion or even fire them if they do not obey their orders. While one occasionally runs into similarly direct encounters with the power of the state, for example, when being controlled by a police patrol, this is not an everyday experience.

Another difference lies in the ways in which cultural power is used. Many corporations use cultural power in order to boost their economic performance, not

because they are genuinely interested in the values and beliefs that are part of their corporate culture. This can introduce a tension—a form of intrinsic dishonesty, as it were—into the very notion of corporate culture, especially when it is used to replace other forms of power, which may be less pleasant to experience, but which are at least honest in the sense that the individuals controlled by them understand exactly what is going on. Moreover, when individuals turn to corporations, they usually do not seek meaning and guidance—they seek an income, and they may also seek other goods of work, such as the development of skills or community with colleagues.⁶² But it is not at all clear that they want to be put under the influence of cultural power; some may indeed search for such workplaces, but others not, and in any case, the decision should be an autonomous one.

Here, it might be objected that business owners and workers should be free—autonomous!—to create the kind of workplace culture they like. Individuals' preference about corporate cultures is likely to differ: some want an intense, "cosy" relationship with their colleagues, while others are fine with more distant, "efficient" practices, and so on. This objection should be granted, but only up to a point: if individuals had preferences for creating cultures that undermine the autonomy of other members of an organization, this is problematic.⁶³ Note, however, that in many cases, it is simply not true that "business owners and workers" create the corporate culture together, on any level. Rather, it is usually imposed one-sidedly, without any voice for workers—a point to which I come back below.

5. A Responsible Use of Corporate Cultural Power?

If these characterizations of corporate cultural power and its risks for autonomy are roughly correct, one might think that there is a straightforward solution: corporations, or those within them that have this power, should use it responsibly, in an autonomy-friendly way. As I have emphasized earlier, autonomy requires the right social and cultural conditions to flourish, and so it seems a reasonable suggestion to say that these conditions should be created in the workplace as well. For example, corporations might want to take steps to fight against sexist and racist prejudices, for example, by providing material that explains the mechanisms of implicit bias and by sending strong signals against any form of discrimination.

Such a responsibility seems particularly urgent when corporations consciously and intentionally try to create a certain corporate culture: they have no moral right to do so in ways that would undermine their employees' autonomy. But even in cases in which they simply let certain cultural developments happen, they might be culpable of negligence, for example, if they tolerate sexist or racist remarks. It should also be noted that in cases in which cultural power is exercised also by individuals "from below," for example, charismatic team members, the same imperative holds for them.⁶⁴

Nonetheless, there remains a problem with such measures, which can be seen by comparing such steps taken by corporations or by governments. Governments can be held democratically accountable, and there are many possibilities of

discussing their policies in public discourse. Unless there is workplace democracy—more on this below—this is not the case within corporations. As emphasized above, the rationale for establishing a certain culture is, in most cases, a purely instrumental one, with an eye to the “bottom line,” and it happens in a “top down” way. There is thus a danger that corporate engagement remains at the surface, where it does not cost much money, without really endorsing autonomy-enhancing values. For example, it is easy to put up posters that encourage employees to “think for themselves”; it is more difficult and costly to ensure that no employee is so overburdened in his or her position that there is no chance to sit down, reflect, and discuss critical issues with colleagues.

To be sure, there are cases in which corporations do hold autonomy-friendly values. Some companies, for example, those with explicit social purposes, are honestly committed to fostering their employees' autonomy, even if this may mean lower profits. Nonetheless, such cases are normatively ambiguous in the sense that this enhancement of autonomy comes from a source that is ultimately problematic—an ambiguity that needs to be openly acknowledged. A good test question for the commitment of a company to fostering their employees' autonomy is therefore: would they acknowledge that their own power is problematic, and would they welcome steps taken by the government or by other actors that further help to strengthen citizens' autonomy? In the next section I turn to such other measures.

6. Limiting Corporate Cultural Power

What steps could one take for reducing the potentially negative influence of corporate cultural power on citizens' autonomy? One challenge here, discussed in response to the second objection above, is that it may be difficult to manage corporate cultures directly, without making the therapy worse than the disease.⁶⁵ Hence, the most promising strategy is to think about other levers within the institutional framework of a society that have an *indirect* effect on how corporate cultural power functions. To be sure, these are not linear, Newtonian equations; rather, we are dealing with likelihoods and informed guesses. These, however, might be refined by empirical research and practical experiments.⁶⁶

A basic, but central point that I already alluded to concerns the general power differential between employers and employees. Although it is not implausible to think that even companies whose employees are free to leave will exert *some* corporate culture power over them, it is the general background of unequal power that makes the phenomenon so insidious in today's societies. How one can reduce the power differentials between employers and employees is, of course, a contested question, far beyond the scope of this paper. Various proposals have been recently brought forward in political philosophy, for example, an unconditional minimum income that facilitates exit, workplace republicanism, or workplace democracy.⁶⁷ These would, in different ways, reduce the power relations that operate in the background of corporate cultural power. This means that an indirect

argument in their favor, based on the need to reduce the risks for autonomy from corporate cultural power, can be added to the other arguments brought forward for them.

Workplace republicanism and workshop democracy are also relevant for a second reason: they could help make the mechanisms of corporate cultural power more explicit, and thereby help individuals to relate to them in a more conscious, and hence more autonomous, way. This is particularly important for morally controversial issues, about which individuals should be able to make a conscious choice, rather than being subdued by corporate cultural power and made complicit in practices they would otherwise reject. In pluralist societies, it is more likely than not that the individuals who are colleagues in one corporation disagree on important moral questions. If such questions come up, individuals should not have to swallow the answers provided by their employers and transmitted through its culture, but rather be able to challenge them and to reflect on their own positions. As Blanc has convincingly argued, there are good reasons to give them more “moral space” once they have understood, for example, that certain projects conflict with their own values.⁶⁸ But this understanding is the end point of a reflective process that needs to get off the ground in the first place. Open conversation about moral conflicts need to be permitted, and there need to be genuine, and not just formal, opportunities for raising one’s voice.

One way of securing such opportunities are corporate governance structures that allow for counterpower, for example, industrial councils or employee representation in company boards. In such governance structures, individuals have meaningful choices to make—an important precondition for developing and maintaining autonomy. In addition, corporations run in such ways, for example, with worker co-determination or as cooperatives, often have an interest in supporting the autonomy of their members, because they in turn depend on them taking co-responsibility for their common endeavor. They might thus create corporate cultures that are salutary for autonomy, such that individuals’ social relations at the workplace—and not only those in their private lives or other social realms—actually support their autonomy. Promoting such structures is thus also a policy that contributes to promoting autonomy-friendly cultural contexts for citizens overall.

A third strategy is to ensure that individuals have sufficient opportunities to leave the sphere of influence of corporate cultural power behind, so that they can critically reflect, with some distance, on what they experience at work and how their employer’s culture might shape their beliefs, preferences, and values. In other words, this means looking for possibilities of strengthening individuals’ autonomy *before* they enter the workplace. The segmentation of one’s life into work and nonwork is sometimes described as dangerous because, at work, individuals may not feel bound by moral imperatives that they willingly accept in their private lives.⁶⁹ But the alternative, a close integration of “work” and “life,” does not necessarily come in the form of individuals carrying their moral convictions into their work place—it can also take the form of corporate cultural power pervading

not only individuals' work lives, but also their private lives. Deal and Kennedy write that "Strong cultures create meaning for people. Through their rituals they teach people how to behave, not just in their corridors of power but in the world at large."⁷⁰ One would hope that in a free, democratic society, individuals are able to wander other corridors as well, in order to think critically about the "meaning" created by their corporate culture. The flexibilization of working time can allow individuals to better organize their lives according to their own preferences,⁷¹ but it can have problematic side-effects with regard to the cultural power, which can creep into more and more parts of their lives.

A number of countermeasures can be taken, however, to make this influence less pressing. One aspect is a simple issue of time: how many hours do people have to work (and how many hours do they have to think about their work in what is officially their spare time?), how many holidays can they take per year? Time not spent in the corporate environment is a form of temporary exit that at least offers a break from the messages sent by the corporate culture. While the distribution of free time in society is a question of distributive justice in and of itself,⁷² it also influences how resilient individuals are when companies try to influence them through corporate cultural power. Individuals should have a right to live a life beyond work, and one of the reasons for this is that in order to develop and maintain their autonomy, they need to be able to acquire critical distance from any single source of cultural influence they are exposed to, including corporate cultural power.⁷³ Even if—and maybe especially when—individuals self-select into a company with a culture that they by and large endorse, they also need to have opportunities to be confronted with other values, commitments, and cultures.⁷⁴

If such measures were in place, many of the most problematic aspects of corporate cultural power would be defused, because the power differential would be reduced. There might still be issues, however, about the *match* between individuals' values and the cultural values of the corporations they work for. Ideally, one would want to see a broad array of corporate cultures (within the scope of what is morally legitimate), so that individuals have a meaningful choice between working for more communitarian, more individualistic, more tranquil or more fast-moving companies, and so on. For that to be possible, the labor market needs to be sufficiently flexible—a fourth strategy that can help to mitigate problems of mismatches. There should be no unnecessary obstacles, such as health insurance or pension payments that are tied to specific employers and not transferable, for individuals to switch between jobs, so that they can find employers whose culture corresponds to their own values, even when these change in the course of their lives. Also, companies should be explicit and honest about their culture, so that individuals can make informed decisions when looking for jobs.

This leads to a last point, namely the broader question of the sources of cultural power in a society. Earlier, I had mentioned the obvious fact that individuals are exposed to various cultural influences, not just corporate cultural power. Various individuals and institutions attempt to influence the beliefs and values of individuals, including religious organizations, TV personalities, or fashion gurus.

In his list of normative organizations Amitai Etzioni includes labor unions, political parties, and professional organizations.⁷⁵ Why, one might ask, should these not be considered threats to individuals' autonomy as well? Above, I have argued that the impact of corporate cultural power is more intense, in term of time, and often also more insidious, when cultural power is used for instrumental reasons. Most corporations simply do not exist in order to create and maintain a certain kind of culture, whereas this is indeed the case for certain other groups and institutions to which individuals turn when looking for meaning and guidance. While one might want to criticize some of the ways in which this happens, there is at least no problem of implicitness.

The positive effect of such *other* institutions is that they can help limit the influence of corporate cultural power on individuals' autonomy, by diversifying the sets of beliefs, values, and preferences they are exposed to. In a society whose citizens are keen to safeguard their autonomy against the threats created by corporate cultural power, such institutions should be welcomed. It might even be said that it is preferable that they, rather than corporations, exercise cultural power. In the case of, say, religious organizations or social movements we assume that what motivates their leaders to influence their followers' beliefs and values is that they *actually* believe in them, and we may become very skeptical if we realize that they also benefit financially.

In order to develop and maintain their autonomy, individuals need to be able to familiarize themselves with, and compare, different worldviews and sets of principles, and they need time to think about them critically, together with others or in an inner dialogue of the kind Arendt describes. If their lives are more and more engulfed by the corporate cultural power of their employers—or of other companies they interact with—these preconditions of autonomy become precarious. It is far preferable to live in a society in which there are multiple sources of cultural influence, both corporate and otherwise, and in which individuals can have meaningful choice between them. Not least, this provides a buffer against too much cultural power by the *state*—a point that has often been emphasized by liberal thinkers, while similarly dangerous cultural influences coming from the private sector have often been overlooked.⁷⁶

I have argued, above, that such a concern with citizens' autonomy is not perfectionist in any problematic way. In fact, one might venture the guess that by taking steps to reduce corporate cultural power and strengthening autonomy, the citizens of democratic countries would be doing nothing but addressing a prisoners' dilemma. The current situation, with its lack of attention to corporate cultural power, looks very much like a collective action problem: employees as a group seem unable to coordinate their behavior, to counterbalance the pressures put on them by employers. Hence, *everyone* might be better off in a system in which there are stronger safeguards for autonomy.

However, one might also read such safeguards in a stronger way: as protecting the conditions of the possibility of a democratic society. For if individuals are unable to guard their capacity for autonomous reflection, it is not clear whether

the idea and practice of democracy continue to be meaningful. Even if efficiency and economic output might be reduced as a result of measures that protect autonomy—which is an empirical question, and the answer is not at all straightforward, given that countries vary vastly both with regard to productivity per hour and with regard to average annual working hours, and so on—this is a price worth paying for protecting one of the basic tenets of a democratic system.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that corporate cultural power can threaten citizens' autonomy, and that citizens in democratic countries have good reasons take steps to protect themselves against this threat. As my brief discussion of concrete proposals has made clear, some such measures could also be taken under today's nonideal circumstances. Many of them concur with institutional proposals that we can also endorse for other reasons, for example, the reduction of dependence. Pointing out the interrelations of such proposals with questions of corporate cultural power helps us see additional reasons for why they are valuable—why, for example, a fair distribution of sufficient amounts of free time in a society is important, or why it matters to reduce the imbalance of power between employers and employees. Thus, taking corporate cultural power seriously, and considering it from a perspective of autonomy, is also a way of bringing business ethics and political philosophy closer together.

Today, it is very unclear what the future of work will be: some claim that robots will take up many tasks traditionally performed by human beings, others argue that information technologies will break up “the firm” as we know it. Already today, some internet firms have only a tiny number of staff and small amounts of capital, but, thanks to scaling effects, serve millions of customers around the world.⁷⁷ For such business models, questions of corporate cultural power arise not only for employees, but also for various kinds of “users.” It seems fair to say that the power of these corporations is, in many respects, too large; when thinking about how to curtail it, their cultural power should also be taken into account. The members of democratic societies should not have their beliefs, commitments, preferences, and in the final analysis also their political agendas set by corporate agents. If we continue to believe in the autonomy of individuals, as a value in itself and as one of the key preconditions of democracy, the threat to autonomy posed by corporations needs to be a shared concern.

To be sure, this discussion would be easier if corporate cultural power were a less elusive phenomenon. It would be extremely helpful if one could draw on more empirical research: for example, on measurements of the impact of corporate cultural power, or on cross-cultural comparisons of the susceptibility to corporate cultural power, which is likely to be connected to different attitudes to life and work and the roles in different countries. It would be fascinating to compare the impact of corporate cultural power under different types of corporate governance regimes or within different industries. This would allow us to come

up with more concrete proposals, backed up by evidence about what works and what doesn't. But the lack of empirical evidence should not be a reason to neglect this topic—on the contrary. A phenomenon that threatens individuals' autonomy threatens the very core of what democracy is about, and so we cannot afford to overlook it.

I would like to thank audiences at the 2016 workshop "Between Ethics and Efficiency? The Political Theory of Corporate Governance" at Technical University of Munich, at the 2017 workshop "Corporate Social Responsibility: Interdisciplinary Perspectives" at Utrecht University, at the "BEWIP" seminar at the Department of Management, Technical University Munich, and at the 2017 Economic Ethics Network Meeting in Paris as well as the editors and two reviewers for the Journal of Social Philosophy for very helpful comments and suggestions.

Notes

¹Similar issues can arise for non-corporate workplaces. For reasons of scope, and because it covers the largest group of employees, I focus on corporations.

²Own interview, June 2012, for my book *Reclaiming the System: Moral Responsibility, Divided Labour, and the Role of Organizations in Society* (Herzog 2016).

³An example of this distinction would be the difference between the professional perspective of a doctor, which includes elements such as responsibility to patients, and the organizational pressures of the hospital she works for, including the pressures that stem from the hospital's organizational culture. These pressures *can*—and in this case, arguably, *should*—coincide, but they can also go into different directions, for example, when the organizational culture emphasizes "getting things done" even when responsible care for patients would require a slower pace.

⁴See for example, Bakan (2004) and the literature quoted there.

⁵Two exceptions are Etzioni (1961) and Perrow (1986). See note 37 below.

⁶Blanc (2014, 481).

⁷Hochschild (2018).

⁸Fulmer and Barry (2009, 172).

⁹For example, Hsieh (2005); Anderson (2008); Hussain (2012); Ciepley (2013); Blanc and Al-Amoudi (2013); Néron (2015); Singer (2015; 2017; 2018); Blanc (2016); Anderson (2017); Ferreras (2017).

¹⁰Cordelli (2016). See also Cordelli (2017). For a general argument about the importance of theorizing the meso-level see also Herzog (2016).

¹¹While I cannot discuss other organizations in detail, some of my arguments—especially about the imperative to avoid situations in which organizations, through their culture, undermine individuals' autonomy—generalize to such organizations. But the fact that individuals can leave such organizations much more easily than they can leave the realm of paid work makes such scenarios much less likely.

¹²As Joseph Heath, Jeffrey Moriarty, and Wayne Norman (2010) have recently argued, a better integration of these two fields is urgently called for.

¹³See for example, Christman (2009).

¹⁴May (1996, 3).

¹⁵Nedelsky (2011, 13, 49) and *passim*; Nedelsky's core question is what such a concept of autonomy means for the law.

¹⁶I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this point.

¹⁷See similarly couched in terms of "integrity" in May (1996, chap. I.1). As he puts it, it "is best seen as a form of maturation in which reflection on a plurality of values provides a critical coherence to one's experiences" (26).

¹⁸Arendt (2003, 95).

¹⁹Hannah Arendt and Joachim Fest, Interview with Hannah Arendt, 1964. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jF_UvHhbZIA, minute 36.

²⁰For the current purposes, it does not make a difference whether one conceives of these influences in a purely summative way or—perhaps more plausibly—as influencing each other and merging into some more-than-summative, emerging societal culture.

²¹"Do what your peers do" is a common heuristic; see Gigerenzer (2010).

²²For discussions, see for example Raz (1988); Wall (1998).

²³To be sure, insofar as such measures cost money, they do interfere with certain rights of individuals. But these need not be as central for autonomy as the improvements that could be achieved on the other side of the equation.

²⁴Dworkin (1986).

²⁵*Ibid.*, 229.

²⁶I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this point.

²⁷Deal and Kennedy (1982, 4).

²⁸Schein (2004, 12).

²⁹Hartman (1996, 149).

³⁰Miller (2010, 26).

³¹Lukes (1947).

³²Hiley (2018, 345).

³³Weick (1995).

³⁴The influence of those who are more powerful in processes of sense-making can be described as a form of "noumenal power" as suggested by Rainer Forst: "To be a subject of power is to be moved by reasons that others have given me and that motivate me to think or act in a certain way intended by the reason-giver" (2015, 112). However, this notion of power is so general (and intended as purely descriptive) that it needs to be specified further for different kinds of contexts and constellations—as I try to do here with regard to corporate cultural power.

³⁵Hallett (2003).

³⁶Hallett (2003, 134).

³⁷Two notions in organization studies are relevantly similar to the notion of corporate cultural power. The first is Amitai Etzioni's (1961) notion of "normative control." Etzioni categorizes organizations as using coercive, utilitarian, or normative control. In "normative organizations" compliance rests "principally on internalization of directives accepted as legitimate" (40); "leadership, rituals, manipulation of social and prestige symbols, and resocialization are among the more important techniques of control used." My notion of cultural power is broader because it covers not only intentional ways of exercising control, but also unintentional or secondary effects. A second notion is Charles Perrow's notion of "premis control." His approach is "based upon the idea that to shape behavior, you have to shape the premises of decision making" (1986, 127). Perrow argues that "these premises are to be found in the 'vocabulary' of the organization, the structure of communication, rules and regulations and standard programs, selection criteria for personnel, and so on—in short, in the structural aspects" (128). This notion is in one sense narrower than my notion of cultural power because it focuses exclusively on what happens *within* organizations; cultural power, in contrast, can radiate beyond the boundaries of organizations. On the other hand, "premis control" is a broader notion, because the premises of decision making also contain other kinds of power, for example, rewards or punishments.

³⁸Hallett (2003, 132).

³⁹See, for example, Etzioni (1961, 145); Ouchi (1980, 132).

⁴⁰Peters and Waterman (1982); see similarly McCoy (1985).

⁴¹Peters and Waterman (1982, 26).

⁴²Ibid., 78ff.

⁴³Deal and Kennedy (1982).

⁴⁴Peters and Waterman (1982, 75).

⁴⁵Deal and Kennedy (1982, 5).

⁴⁶Ibid., 32.

⁴⁷Ibid., 34.

⁴⁸Ibid., 59.

⁴⁹Ouchi (1980).

⁵⁰Ibid., 36.

⁵¹See similarly Blanc (2014); Néron (2015); Anderson (2017).

⁵²See Hiley (2018). For a general discussion of relevance of Michel Foucault's work for business ethics, see also Crane, Knights, and Starkey (2008).

⁵³As research by Alexander Hertel-Fernandez (2016) shows, this practice of "employer mobilization" is far more widespread in the United States than one might assume; messages are often sent in conjunction with warnings about the fate of the company or of individuals' jobs if the "wrong" candidate wins an election.

⁵⁴Kunda (1996, chap. 5).

⁵⁵Kunda (1996, 224–26). This problem may be particularly acute for individuals who hope to climb the corporate ladder. One might therefore downplay it as a luxury problem mostly relevant for careerists, but one should not forget that climbing corporate ladders is an important mechanism of social mobility. It seems problematic to expect those who want to be socially mobile to carry the extra burden of dealing with "culture traps"—and it is by no means clear that they are really the only ones who have to do so.

⁵⁶A related objection, with different normative implications, is to hold that managers are not responsible for organizational cultures, because these are influenced by broader trends, for example management fads that wash over whole industries (see, e.g., Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). If, or insofar as, this is the case, it means that the buck does not stop at managers, but rather at those—for example, business school professors or consultants—who start such fads. But it does not reduce the normative weight of the phenomenon.

⁵⁷In the rest of this paper, I mostly speak of management as the addressee of normative claims, but this should be understood as *pars pro toto* for everyone who can influence corporate culture.

⁵⁸In a recent paper, Jooho Lee (2018) holds that corporations, understood along the lines of the "hierarchies" model, are a general threat to autonomy, because individuals give up control over the ends that they will set for themselves in the future. This argument is different from my argument about corporate cultural power because it mainly refers to explicit forms of power: orders given by bosses. From Lee's perspective, understanding corporations along the lines of the "nexus of contracts" literature remains an option that is compatible with employees' autonomy. The practical question that flows from this argument is: what would make sure that corporations function as sets of contracts rather than as problematic "hierarchies"? The considerations one could adduce in response partly overlap with the ones that I discuss, below, as means for reducing corporate cultural power.

⁵⁹Silver and Geller (1978, 135).

⁶⁰See, for example, Bandura (1999).

⁶¹The arguments in this section leave open the possibility that cultural influences in other spheres might also pose problematic threats to individuals' autonomy, as mentioned earlier.

⁶²Gheaus and Herzog (2016).

⁶³If the members of an organization created a culture that undermined their *own* autonomy, this might raise questions about legitimate paternalist interventions. For reasons of space, and because such a scenario does not seem very likely, I here skip this question.

⁶⁴It goes without saying that corporate cultures should also avoid condoning other morally problematic practices, for example, corruption. As a study by Jamie-Lee Campbell and Anja Göritz shows, corrupt organizations are pervaded by narratives and assumption, for example, that they are "fighting a war" and that "the end justifies the mean" (2013). Instead, they should create a cor-

porate culture that is conducive to moral behavior, for example, by raising awareness of morally salient issues in global supply chains. Empirical research on “ethical climate” (Victor and Cullen 1987; 1988) and “ethical culture” (Treviño 2015, 2017), operationalized as survey items, has explored their relations to other variables, for example, whether or not individuals would engage in questionable selling practices (Barnett and Vaicys 2000). Such moral climates are assumed to have a moderating effect on individual behavior (ibid., 360). See also Douglas, Davidson, and Schwartz (2001) on support for an indirect relation between ethical judgments and ethical culture. William Wines and J. B. Hamilton (2009) explore how “new stories” can contribute to cultural change for the better).

⁶⁵This does not mean that there could not be direct regulation that bans extreme forms of corporate cultural power, for example, techniques of manipulation.

⁶⁶In what follows, I focus on steps that have a fairly direct influence on the impact of corporate cultural power. In addition, democratic states can take *general* steps to strengthen their citizens' autonomy, as briefly described above—these include steps like offering general education that strengthens people's ability to reflect about their choices, or making sure that individuals have meaningful options of shifting to different careers. It should also be noted that all my considerations are *pro tanto* considerations.

⁶⁷On an unconditional basic income, see for example, Widerquist (2013). On workplace republicanism see Hsieh (2005). On workplace democracy see especially the recent account by Ferreras (2017). For an overview of the recent debate see Frega, Herzog, and Neuhäuser (2019). In the debate about workplace democracy, one often finds a link between autonomy, meaningful work, and democracy (especially in Rössler 1998 and Yeoman 1995). But none of these authors has made an argument based on considerations about corporate culture, to the best of my knowledge.

⁶⁸Blanc (2014).

⁶⁹For example, Jackall (2012).

⁷⁰Deal and Kennedy (1982, 83).

⁷¹Blanc (2014, 485).

⁷²For example, Goodin (2010); Rose (2014; 2016).

⁷³Cf. also Néron on separation between workplace and private life (2015, 115).

⁷⁴Does this limit the autonomy of others who prefer a life with longer working hours (as in “truly prefer,” not as in “prefer because the hourly wage is so low that this is the only way to reach a decent standard of living”)? In the best of all possible worlds, every individual could choose to work exactly the amount of hours they prefer, but for practical reasons (mostly because of competitive dynamics), regulation might nonetheless be needed. In such a case, there might also be some losses in terms of autonomy, but these might be outweighed by gains. One might also raise questions about paternalism: might it be legitimate to prevent individuals from harming themselves through their own choices? For reasons of space, I cannot here go into a detailed discussion, but it seems to me that the protection of individuals' autonomy can in fact justify certain paternalistic measures, as long as careful measures against abuse are taken.

⁷⁵Etzioni (1961, 40ff).

⁷⁶A thoughtful discussion that emphasizes both the threats to freedom from the state *and* from intermediary groups and organizations—although explicitly excluding economic organizations—can be found in Levy (2015).

⁷⁷See for example, Davis (2015) or Kelly (2016), on “platforms” as a principle of corporate organization.

References

- Anderson, Elizabeth. 2008. “Expanding the Egalitarian Toolbox: Equality and Bureaucracy.” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 82 (1): 139–60.
- . 2017. *Private Government. How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk about It)*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Arendt, Hannah. 2003. *Responsibility and Judgment*. Edited and with an Introduction by Jerome Kohn. New York: Schocken Books.
- Bakan, Joel. 2004. *The Corporation. The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*. London: Constable.
- Bandura, Albert. 1999. "Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities." *Personality and Social Psychology Review. Special Issue on Evil and Violence* 3: 193–209.
- Barnett, Tim, and Cheryl Vaicys. 2000. "The Moderating Effect of Individuals' Perceptions of Ethical Work Climate on Ethical Judgments and Behavioral Intentions." *Journal of Business Ethics* 27: 351–62.
- Blanc, Sandrine. 2014. "Expanding Workers' 'Moral Space': A Liberal Critique of Corporate Capitalism." *Journal of Business Ethics* 120: 473–88.
- . 2016. "Are Rawlsian Considerations of Corporate Governance Illiberal? A Reply to Singer." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 26 (3): 407–21.
- Blanc, Sandrine, and Ismael Al-Amoudi. 2013. "Corporate Institutions in a Weakened Welfare State: A Rawlsian Perspective." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 23 (4): 497–525.
- Campbell, Jamie-Lee, and Anja S. Göritz. 2013. "Culture Corrupts! A Qualitative Study of Organizational Culture in Corrupt Organizations." *Journal of Business Ethics* 120: 291–311.
- Christman, John. 2009. "Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta. Retrieved November 20, 2019, from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/autonomy-moral/>
- Ciepley, David. 2013. "Beyond Public and Private: Toward a Political Theory of the Corporation." *American Political Science Review* 107 (1): 139–58.
- Cordelli, Chiara. 2016. "Justice below the State: Civil Society as a Site of Justice." *British Journal of Political Science* 46 (4): 915–36.
- . 2017. "Democratizing Organized Religion." *Journal of Politics* 79 (2): 576–90.
- Crane, Andrew, David Knights, and Ken Starkey. 2008. "The Conditions of Our Freedom: Foucault, Organization, and Ethics." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 18 (3): 299–320.
- Davis, Jerry. 2015. "Corporate Power in the 21st Century." In *Performance and Progress. Essays on Capitalism, Business, and Society*, ed. Subramanian Rangan, 395–414. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Deal, Terry, and Allen Kennedy. 1982. *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*. New York: Perseus.
- DiMaggio, Paul J., and Walter W. Powell. 1983. "The Iron Cage Revisited: Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields." *American Sociological Review* 48: 147–60.
- Douglas, Patricia Casey, Ronald A. Davidson, and Bill Schwartz. 2001. "The Effect of Organizational Culture and Ethical Orientation on Accountants' Ethical Judgments." *Journal of Business Ethics* 34: 101–21.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 1986. "Can a Liberal State Support Art?" In *A Matter of Principle*, 223–33. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Etzioni, Amitai. 1961. *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations: On Power, Involvement, and Their Correlates*. New York: The Free Press.
- Ferreras, Isabelle. 2017. *Firms as Political Entities: Saving Democracy through Economic Bicameralism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Forst, Rainer. 2015. "Nooumenal Power." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 23 (3): 111–27.
- Frega, Roberto, Lisa Herzog, and Chris Neuhäuser. 2019. "Workplace Democracy – The Recent Debate." *Philosophy Compass* 14 (4): e12574.
- Fulmer, Ingrid Smithey, and Bruce Barry. 2009. "Managed Hearts and Wallets: Ethical Influence by and within Organizations." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 19 (2): 155–91.
- Gheaus, Anca, and Lisa Herzog. 2016. "The Goods of Work (other than Money!)." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 47 (1): 70–89.
- Gigerenzer, Gerd. 2010. "Moral Satisficing: Rethinking Moral Behavior as Bounded Rationality." *Topics in Cognitive Science* 2 (3): 528–54.

- Goodin, Robert. 2010. "Temporal Justice." *Journal of Social Policy* 39 (1): 1–16.
- Hallett, Tim. 2003. "Symbolic Power and Organizational Culture." *Sociological Theory* 21 (2): 128–49.
- Hartman, Edwin M. 1996. *Organizational Ethics and the Good Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heath, Joseph, Jeffrey Moriarty, and Wayne Norman. 2010. "Business Ethics and (or as) Political Philosophy." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 20 (3): 427–52.
- Hertel-Fernandez, Alexander. 2016. "How Employers Recruit Their Workers Into Politics—And Why Political Scientists Should Care." *Perspectives on Politics* 14 (2): 410–21.
- Herzog, Lisa. 2016. *Reclaiming the System: Moral Responsibility, Divided Labour, and the Role of Organizations in Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hiley, David. 2018. "Power and Values in Corporate Life." *Journal of Business Ethics* 6 (5): 343–53.
- Hochschild, Arlie R. 1987. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Feelings*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hsieh, Nien-hê. 2005. "Rawlsian Justice and Workplace Republicanism." *Social Theory and Practice* 31 (1): 115–42.
- Hussain, Waheed. 2012. "Nurturing the Sense of Justice: The Rawlsian Argument for Democratic Corporatism." In *Property-Owning Democracy: Rawls and Beyond*, ed. Martin O'Neill and Thad Williamson, 180–200. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Jackall, Robert. 1988. *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kelly, Kevin. 2016. *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future*. New York: Viking.
- Kunda, Gideon. 1996. *Engineering Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Lee, Jooho. 2018. "Contracts and Hierarchies: A Moral Examination of Economic Theories of the Firm." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 28 (2): 153–73.
- Levy, Jacob. 2015. *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lukes, Stephen. 1947. *Power. A Radical View*. London: Macmillan.
- May, Larry. 1996. *The Socially Responsible Self: Social Theory and Professional Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McCoy, Charles S. 1985. *Management of Values: The Ethical Difference in Corporate Policy and Performance*. London: Pitman.
- Meyer, John W., and Brian Rowan. 1977. "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony." *American Journal of Sociology* 83 (2): 340–63.
- Miller, Seumas. 2010. *The Moral Foundations of Social Institutions: A Philosophical Study*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Nedelsky, Jennifer. 2011. *Law's Relations: A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Néron, Pierre-Yves. 2015. "Rethinking the Very Idea of Egalitarian Markets and Corporations: Why Relationships Might Matter More Than Distribution." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 25: 93–124.
- Ouchi, William G. 1980. "Markets, Bureaucracies, and Clans." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 25 (1): 129–41.
- Perrow, Charles. 1986. *Complex Organizations. A Critical Essay*. Third Edition. New York: Random House.
- Peters, Thomas J., and Robert H. Waterman Jr. 1982. *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Raz, Joseph. 1988. *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rose, Julie L. 2014. "Money Does Not Guarantee Time: Discretionary Time as a Distinct Object of Distributive Justice." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 22 (4): 438–57.
- _____. 2016. *Free Time*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rössler, Beate. 1998. "Meaningful Work: Arguments from autonomy." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 20: 71–93.
- Schein, Edgar. 2004. *Organisational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Silver, Maury, and Daniel Geller. 1978. "On the Irrelevance of Evil: The Organization and Individual Action." *Journal of Social Issues* 34: 125–35.
- Singer, Abraham. 2015. "There Is No Rawlsian Theory of Corporate Governance." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 25 (1): 65–92.
- _____. 2017. "The Corporation as Relational Entity." *Polity* 49 (3): 328–51.
- _____. 2018. "The Political Nature of the Firm and the Cost of Norms." *Journal of Politics* 80 (3): 831–44.
- Treviño, Linda K. 2015. "Ethical Decision-Making in Organizations: A Person-Situation Interactionist Model." *Academy of Management Review* 11: 601–17.
- _____. 2017. "A Cultural Perspective on Changing and Developing Organizational Ethics." *Research in Organizational Change and Development* 4: 195–230.
- Victor, Bart, and John B. Cullen. 1987. "A Theory and Measure of Ethical Climate in Organizations." In *Research in Corporate Social Performance and Policy*, ed. W. C. Frederick, 51–71. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- _____. 1988. "The Organizational Bases of Ethical Work Climates." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 33: 101–25.
- Wall, Steven. 1998. *Liberalism, Perfectionism and Restraint*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weick, Karl E. 1995. *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Widerquist, Karl. 2013. *Independence, Propertylessness, and Basic Income: A Theory of Freedom as the Power to Say No*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wines, William A., and J. B. Hamilton. 2009. "On Changing Organizational Cultures by Injecting New Ideologies: The Power of Stories." *Journal of Business Ethics* 89: 433–47.
- Yeoman, Ruth. 1995. *Meaningful Work and Workplace Democracy: A Philosophy of Work and a Politics of Meaningfulness*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.